

Senate ships \$6.35-billion budget to Carcieri

Lawmakers also voted to remove open-space protection for a state police headquarters at Big River Reservoir, and approved a bill that would allow Beacon Mutual Insurance Co. to morph from a nonprofit to a for-profit company.

09:11 AM EDT on Thursday, June 30, 2005

BY EDWARD FITZPATRICK, SCOTT MAYEROWITZ, LIZ ANDERSON and PETER B. LORD
Journal Staff Writers

PROVIDENCE -- All 38 senators voted last night in support of a new \$6.35-billion budget, sending the measure on to Governor Carcieri's desk as the legislature presses toward the end of this year's legislative session.

Carcieri is expected to sign the budget for the fiscal year starting tomorrow into law. It would be the first time the Republican governor has not vetoed a budget from the Democrat-dominated General Assembly.

The Senate spent 14 minutes on the budget, mostly thanking staff for their hard work. There were no changes to the budget the House passed Monday.

Sen. Harold M. Metts, D-Providence, was the only person to speak at length saying it was a "great" budget, but did not meet every need, and hurt some people with changes to the pension system. "When you represent a poor community: when you need a plate of food, a piece of bread won't do," Metts said.

Majority Leader M. Teresa Paiva Weed, D-Newport, said the budget made property-tax relief a priority through a reduction in the car tax and more aid to the state's communities.

The Senate also passed new pension rules that establish a minimum retirement age, cut annual cost-of-living increases and reduce the dollar value of each year of work for new and non-vested teachers and state employees.

Unlike the House which voted on each section of the budget -- including the pension changes -- the Senate took one vote on the tax-and-spending package.

Earlier in the night, the Senate voted 21 to 16 to remove open-space protection to allow a new state police headquarters on 18 acres of Big River Reservoir property in West Greenwich.

The vote came two days after Carcieri said he was abandoning plans to put the \$48-million headquarters at the Big River site because of vehement opposition from environmentalists. And it came one day after about 16 troopers -- some in uniform, most in suits -- lined the back of the Senate chamber to show support for putting the headquarters at the site.

Sen. Frank A. Ciccone III, D-Providence, called the bill "a political nightmare to all of us," and he accused Carcieri of using the Senate to pass the bill "so he can get the credit and we take the heat."

"As we saw in the paper the governor came out with an environmental group stating that he was not in favor of this bill," Ciccone said. "But yet behind the scenes, in his ultimate wisdom, he had sent word to us that he would not veto the bill."

So Ciccone called for his colleagues to pass the bill as a way of putting "the heat" back on the governor. "If he's so environmentally conscious, let him veto it," he said.

While the bill enables the governor to put the state police headquarters at the Big River site, it doesn't require him to. And last night, Carcieri spokesman Jeff Neal said, "The governor has no intention of using that parcel for any other purpose than open space regardless of whether the General Assembly passes this bill."

Neal said he hasn't spoken to Carcieri about whether he would veto the bill. "But it's an irrelevant question," he said, "because ultimately the governor will preserve that site for open space."

Neal said the governor's office contacted the state police superintendent, Col. Steven M. Pare, yesterday and "made it clear the governor doesn't believe it's appropriate for state troopers to appear on state time or in official uniforms to advocate against a state position." He added, "The governor does recognize that state employees are free to express themselves as citizens on their free time."

Maj. Joseph Miech, the third-ranking member of the state police, said yesterday that the troopers appeared on their own initiative. "We [later] became aware that

some troopers appeared in uniform either after or before their tours and we can tell you that will never happen again."

Among those who supported the bill, Senate Finance Chairman Stephen Alves, D-West Warwick, said no one has argued that the site is environmentally sensitive, and he said a proposal by Sen. James C. Sheehan, D-North Kingstown, would ensure that it wouldn't set a precedent by ensuring a more thorough review process. Alves said that the price of the state police project will keep going up if it's delayed.

Among those who opposed the bill, Sen. V. Susan Sosnowski, D-South Kingstown, said that the legislation "would set a serious precedent for developing other preserved properties in this state." And Sen. Kevin A. Breene, R-West Greenwich, said townspeople had their land taken so the state could pursue a reservoir project in that area. But the plan was abandoned, and he said it would be wrong to now use that land for another purpose.

The Senate quickly approved, without debate, a House version of a bill that would allow the state's dominant workers' compensation insurer, Beacon Mutual Insurance Co., to morph from a tightly-regulated nonprofit to a for-profit company that can sell its products out of state. The 23-10 vote sends the bill on to Carcieri, who has said he will veto it.

Supporters have said the legislation will allow the state-birthered company to stretch its wings. But the governor has said the legislation would dismantle key state controls over the company and make it easier for Beacon, which covers about 90 percent of all Rhode Island employers, to raise its rates.

MEANWHILE, the House approved, 36-27, a bill enabling municipalities and the state to install cameras to catch drivers running red lights. Proponents said the measure was about safety, but others said cities like Providence and Cranston were just looking for money.

Rep. Charlene M. Lima, D-Cranston, who has fought mandatory seat-belt laws, said people would be deprived of their civil liberties. "It is totally ridiculous to use a safety excuse to raise revenue," Lima said.

The registered owner of a vehicle -- not necessarily the person driving -- would be liable for the fine. It would not be considered a moving violation, become part of a driving record or affect insurance.

Rep. Joseph S. Almeida, D-Providence, said it "is just another way to violate the civil rights of others," particularly minorities. "The Providence Police Department is already selective in who they stop."

However, House Majority Leader Gordon D. Fox, D-Providence, said the cameras take police discrimination out of the equation. They just look at a license plate, which he said, does not depict the color of one's skin.

The law would be repealed in three years unless lawmakers renew it.

After a contentious debate, the House narrowly defeated a bill from Rep. Arthur Corvese, D-North Providence, that would have cemented, in law, the right of a Rhode Island medical-waste processing company, Stericycle Inc., to dump its end products at the state's Central Landfill in Johnston.

Supporters said Resource Recovery Corp., which operates the landfill, and the state's attorney general had signed off on the arrangement. They said the company needed the legislative change to assure it could continue the deal long-term, to help it in signing contracts with customers.

But opponents said 90 percent of the company's waste was taken in from out of state, pointed out that the landfill only had limited room, and questioned the merits of putting the change into law.

The House also voted in favor of removing any residency requirements applying to city and town workers, amending a bill passed a day earlier that, at first, applied to just police and firefighters. The vote came over the objections of several Providence lawmakers, who said such decisions should be left up to local voters. The Senate could take up the issue today.

The Senate also passed a bill by Sen. Rhoda Perry, D-Providence, extending death benefits for police officers and firefighters to domestic partners. The chamber had passed an identical bill only to see it die Tuesday in the House Judiciary Committee. The new version keeps the issue alive.